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17 March 1986

Background: Domestic Situation in South Korea

The South Korean opposition says it hopes by the end of the year to collect 10 million signatures--representing roughly half the electorate--in support of direct election of Chun's successor. Although the petition drive falls outside specific constitutional guarantees and equates to a public opinion poll, government claims that it is illegal rest on the questionable assertion that it poses a threat to public order.

petition

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Opposition New Korea Democratic Party President Lee Min Woo, an oldline career politician, presides over an uneasy and fractious coalition. The party's standing adviser, Kim Young Sam, leads the largest faction. He is widely viewed as uninspiring and relatively moderate but has become more combative in an effort to dominate his tenuous alliance with long-time rival Kim Dae Jung. Dissident leader Kim Dae Jung, although still under government ban from political activity, guides the second largest faction. Kim is anathema to many senior government and military leaders, who see him as a left-leaning demagogue.

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Government efforts to suppress the annual spring and fall rounds of campus protests have kept many students on the sidelines and caused student radicals to turn increasingly to protest attacks against symbolic off-campus targets, including ruling party offices and US facilities. The petition campaign could give radicals and students a common focus, particularly around the 19 April anniversary of the student revolution that toppled Syngman Rhee in 1960.

campus protests

19 Apr.

Representatives of the activist minority among Korean Christians, including the Korean National Council of Churches and chief Catholic prelate Cardinal Kim, have endorsed the petition campaign but stopped short of advocating direct political action.

church

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Despite apparent parallels between South Korea and the Philippines--including Chun's widespread unpopularity and the perception that the United States plays a determining role in shaping domestic politics--there are key differences: The South Korean economy is healthy and poised for renewed growth, the military remains united behind the government in the face of a palpable North Korean threat, and no dramatic event has overcome popular reluctance to participate actively in the anti-Chun movement.

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POLICE ARREST STUDENTS WHO STORM SOUTH KOREAN OFFICE

SEOUL, March 18, Reuter - Police overpowered and arrested 16 students who stormed the office of the President of the Federation of Korean Industries today, witnesses said.

The students, from six universities, smashed windows and tried to distribute anti-government leaflets before being arrested.

Federation President Chung Ju-Yong, who is also chairman of the Hyundai business group, was not in the office at the time, officials said.

Police have tightened security at most government and foreign offices in Seoul after receiving tips that radical students planned to occupy them and stage anti-government protests.

Thousands of students clashed with riot police last week in campus demonstrations held to demand full democracy in South Korea and to back an opposition campaign for direct presidential elections in place of the current electoral college system.

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